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For Better Intelligence

It is essential, in the kind of world we live in today, for America to have a powerful military force. It is also essential that the nation have the ability to know what's going on in other countries, particularly in those that are our foes or potential foes.

Because of abuses, or alleged abuses, in U.S. covert operations, Congress in recent years has imposed certain restrictions on the nation's intelligence activities, restrictions that many conservative members of Congress believe have gone too far. Congressional oversight of covert intelligence operations has been broadened. Under the Freedom of Information Act, the intelligence services are required to reveal some information the disclosure of which can be harmful to national security, it is argued.

But the most serious problem in U.S. intelligence is the "staggering failures" in the analyzing of intelligence information, in the opinion of national security analysts of the Heritage Foundation. To overcome this defect, the analysts propose the establishment of an independent commission, "consisting of veteran analysts as well as critics of the intelligence community," to give the administration views other than the official "party line."

As the Heritage Foundation experts see it, the most serious failure in intelligence analysis has led to inaccurate forecasts of Soviet military strength over the past two decades. Other failures cited include (1) the 1977 report that the

USSR would experience a major oil crisis within a decade, (2) predictions that the Shah of Iran would remain in power through the 1980s, and (3) the contention that the Soviets would not invade Third World countries, such as Afghanistan.

Under the Heritage analysts' proposal, as outlined in the foundation's National Security Record, the commission would function somewhat in the manner of the "B-team" set up by then-CIA Director George Bush during the Ford administration, although it would have more power. The B-Team principle is that an outside group of national security experts can provide, where justified, an alternative to the CIA's internal analyses. Heritage believes this "competitive process" can lead to better final conclusions in the foreign intelligence field by countering "institutionalized bias."

If the CIA and the independent commission locked horns over an issue, the president would be the arbiter and make the final decision. It is reasonable to assume that whether there was or was not disagreement on an issue, the input from two sources — within and without the CIA — should help to make possible a sounder decision.

There may well be flaws in the proposal that would be revealed in detailed congressional and/or administrative discussions of it. But the nation's intelligence operations have not been marked by notable achievements in recent years, and a new approach is at least worth careful study.

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